

# ALLISON ALEXIS: AN ANGEL OF HOPE

By ARIEL HERNANDEZ



Allison Alexis (left) with Anna Kril (center) and Anna Zabniak (right)

"You know how they say be careful what you wish for because you just might get it? Well, I did. I called it."

Allison Alexis, 51, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2011. While it was a shock, for her the cancer diagnosis was not the worst thing that could have happened. At the time, she felt that she had already lived through her most painful experience: losing her longtime partner in a failed relationship two years earlier.

Alexis went on to realize that the cancer that could have killed her actually helped teach her how to live life again—giving her hope that she now passes on to hundreds of others as a breast cancer survivor.

Alexis immigrated to the United States from Trinidad and Tobago in 1987 with her mother and younger sister. Just 20 years old at the time, she went her own way after a few months, moving in with her boyfriend of three years who had also moved to America from Trinidad. She settled in the Bronx against the wishes of some in her family.

"That was tough because it was the first time I had ever left my mom's house coming from the Caribbean," said Alexis. "My analysis of that is that it was like sending a carpenter out with no tools."

Her mother ended up moving to Massachusetts with Alexis' older and younger sisters, leaving Alexis on her own, with only her aunt and uncle in New York City.

Shortly after, her boyfriend decided that he wanted to be a truck driver, which required him to leave New York for training. Alexis

went to Massachusetts to stay with her family for a few months until he returned. When he got back, Alexis spent about three and a half years with him on the road.

"It was fun," said Alexis. "I saw quite a bit of the United States."

After 25 years together, her boyfriend announced he didn't want to be with her anymore, and Alexis found herself alone. At age 42, she was hurt and sad. She told the Queens Tribune she felt like she didn't want to live anymore.

Two years later the cancer came. Alexis began to feel lightheaded and dizzy each month.

"It was so bad that every morning when I walked along Queens Boulevard, I couldn't cross the street by myself because I knew that if I did, I would fall," said Alexis. "So I would be begging people to cross me. It went

on every month."

Alexis' doctor instructed her to take oral contraceptives, which would supply hormones.

"I said no; hormones are bad," said Alexis.

But her doctor convinced her that a mild dose of birth control pills would stop the dizziness.

"Little did I know that going on the mildest dose of birth control would be what brought my cancer forth," said Alexis.

As a woman in her 40s, Alexis went for a mammogram every year as instructed. After her mammogram in 2011, she started receiving calls to return for a follow-up—calls she refused to answer, as many women do when fearing bad news.

"My primary doctor called me saying that I need to answer those calls and I need to go in to do another test," said Alexis. "By then, I

suspected I had breast cancer."

Alexis said not only did she have to have another mammogram, but a sonogram as well, which showed the lump on her left breast.

The next step was a needle biopsy, followed by a regular biopsy, followed by a CT scan, MRI and then finally a full body scan.

"I'm lying in the room. The doctor comes in and begins stapling the breast," said Alexis. "She's clamping the area so that when I go for surgery, they know where exactly to go in. At this point, I know it's positive. Why do I know it's positive? Because after being with my [partner] for over 20-something years, taking care of him, doing everything for him, when I found out he was leaving, I didn't want to live anymore. I called it. I called this. So when the doctor called me to tell me my results, I wasn't surprised."

Alexis was at work when she received the call that she was breast cancer positive. She said she could never forget boarding the Q10 bus on Union Turnpike, taking it to her Richmond Hill home.

"I remember crying from the time I got on the bus to the time I got home," said Alexis. From that moment on, everything happened quickly.

With Alexis' surgery set for April 18, 2011, her doctor recommended that she seek support from SHAREing & CAREing—a nonprofit that provides cancer outreach, education, support and advocacy services.

"I will never forget the day I came in. Anna [executive assistant Anna Zabniak] was standing at the door with her arms open, literally," said Alexis. "By then, my face was drowning in tears. She gave me the biggest hug and told me that they were there, and it's true: They were. They've been there since 2011 and they're still here for me now."

A couple of weeks after the surgery, Alexis would begin getting chemo every three weeks until August 4 of that year.

"First rounds of chemo, my hair was gone," said Alexis. "That was insane, but the most insane thing is that first chemo and the pain you feel in your joints. I had never felt anything like that in my life. It felt like someone was pulling the marrow out of my bones."

The pain Alexis was feeling was "normal." After chemo, patients are given shots of Neulasta to build back the white blood cells that the chemo kills.

"When I started chemo, many times I didn't have anyone, and Anna would come sit with me and make sure I got home," said Alexis. Anna Zabniak remembered one of the times that she attended chemo with Alexis.

"I've been in rooms with people having chemo before, but there was a time that I went with Allison where they wanted to keep her nails from turning color so they would put bags of ice on her hands and I would keep talking so that she didn't think about it," said Zabniak. On Sept. 7, 2011, Alexis began her radiation treatments, which left a permanent dark discoloration on the left side of her face.

It wasn't until November of 2011 that Alexis' treatments ended. Her cancer was gone, but she then faced the symptoms of menopause, in addition to having to take medication to get the chemo out of her system.

"It took me two years to get rid of the chemo," said Alexis. "To this day, I still have pain in my feet and my fingers randomly go numb. But I'm doing OK."

Although Alexis defeated the cancer, she didn't forget about it. She instead decided to create a cancer walk in Richmond Hill, which has taken place every September since 2014, with all donations going directly to SHAREing & CAREing.

"There are many that go through the process and get on with life and could care less about anyone else; those are the ones that usually end up with recurrences and become bitter," said Anna Kril, president and founder of SHAREing & CAREing. "But Allison has made tremendous inroads and outreach in our most vulnerable populations. That's why it's so beautiful what she does—to go through her own personal hardships, be able to overcome that and then have this strength to help others. She always gives back and she also is saving so many people's lives by making them aware that they have to do this."

During each cancer walk, Alexis awards either cancer survivors or those who are battling the disease for their strength and courage.

In addition to the walk, Alexis established her own support group, "Angels of Hope."

"So many people battling cancer can't talk to their families and friends because they can't understand the pain and process," said Alexis. "Through this group, we can support each other and comfort each other."

Alexis said that if she had the option to go back and change anything, she wouldn't.

"I didn't want to be alive after being with someone for 20-something years," said Alexis. "Today, I feel that battling breast cancer happened to me because I needed to pull up my pants and realize how strong I am. I know now that it wasn't for me to die. It was for me to understand my strength and what I have to offer. All my life I've helped everyone I could help, and it's what I'm going to keep doing until God is ready for me."

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